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ABSTRACT

This paper reports case study findings that reveal diverse patterns of library and information services in five selected rural communities in Thailand. The case study involved site visits to examine documents, archival records, and library collections, to conduct individual focus groups and interviews, and to schedule observations. The patterns of library and information services included: rural public libraries, learning centers, and village reading centers under the public library system; a bookmobile service--part of a university library extension program; and a combined library within the school library system. The level of services of these patterns are discussed in relationship to the information policies, information infrastructure, and information needs and use. A number of recommendations are proposed to improve and promote the existing services. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/MES)

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Delivering and Promoting Library Services in Rural Thailand

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Abstract

The paper reports the author's case study findings which reveal diverse patterns of library and information services in the rural communities in Thailand. These patterns include: rural public libraries, learning centers, and village reading centers, under the public library system; a bookmobile service, part of a university library extension program; and a combined library, within the school library system. The level of services of these patterns are discussed in relationship to the information policies, information infrastructure, and information needs and use. A number of recommendations are proposed to improve and promote the existing services.

Paper

Introduction

This paper is based on the author's dissertation, *Information for rural development: A multiple-case study of library and information services to the rural communities in Thailand* (Cheunwattana, 1998). Based on the widely accepted conceptualization of "information for development," the case study has examined the present status of library and information services in five selected rural communities in Thailand. The central focus of the examination has been on the level of services in relationship to the information policies, information infrastructure (resources, services, and systems), and information needs and use. Three cases represent the public library system, another represents a university library extension program's mobile service, and the last represents a combined school-community library. Four months of fieldwork allowed site visits: to examine documents, achival records, and library collections;

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to conduct many individual focus group and interviews, as well as to schedule numerous observations. A qualitative cross-case analysis produced a rich array of themes and categories, which provides an understanding of each individual case and of patterns emerged across the cases. This paper will address the problems that call for changes in the provision of library and information services to rural communities. It will discuss findings from the analysis which reveal diverse service delivery patterns . And, finally, a number of recommendations are proposed to improve and promote the existing services.

Problems

A developing country in Southeast Asia, Thailand presently has a very large rural population of approximately 43 million (71% of the total population of 60 million) (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 1997, p. 23). As a consequence of past development strategies, which mainly focused on general economic growth and national security, Thailand has made overall progress, but nevertheless faces serious problems. The present context is characterized by an unequal distribution of benefits from economic growth, rural-urban disparities, poverty, inadequate public services, deterioration of environment, and depletion of natural resources (e.g., EIU, 1997; Phongpaichit & Baker, 1995; Minamiguchi, 1995; Ahuja, Bidani, Ferreira, & Walton, 1997).

Although a recent report shows that the poverty rate in Thailand has been rapidly declining over the years, it has become increasingly concentrated in rural areas, particularly among agricultural workers and uneducated dwellers. Between 1975 and 1992, the proportion of the poor living in rural areas has increased from 89% to 94%, while poverty in urban areas has declined from 10% to 1% (Ahuja, Bidani, Ferreira, & Walton, 1997).

As is the case with other basic public services, access to library and information services in rural areas is quite limited. According to the statistics obtained during the fieldwork in 1997, there were 767 public libraries, 1,018 learning centers, and 35,541 village reading centers under the Department of Non-Formal Education within the Ministry of Education. Each library receives an annual budget of US$2,000-2,500. Almost 30,000 villages throughout Thailand are still left without libraries or reading centers. Under the school library system, although an average annual book budget of US$120 is allocated to every primary school, many rural schools do not have libraries. If they do, with such a meager budget and the rising prices of books, their libraries are typically poorly filled. Despite the fact that approximately 10 library extension programs from different universities have been providing additional services, the overall library services for rural Thais are still inadequate.

In spite of the universal nine-year basic education and the impressive overall literacy statistics in Thailand (93% in 1996), a survey by Thailand's Department of Community Development reports that the number of Thai illiterate children is over 800,000 (More than 800,000.., 1995). These figures result from the low quality of rural schools, high drop-out rate, slim chances for secondary education, and a relapse into illiteracy. The figures also suggest an even higher number of illiterate adults.

Statistics show a low production of printed materials. The number of books published each year is approximately 10,000 titles (Bhakdibutr, 1995; Wattananusit, 1996). There were 35 newspapers with 2,700,000 circulation; and 280 periodical titles with 1,850,000 circulation. These figures also reflect a low cumsumption of print, i.e., 46 copies of newspapers and 32 copies of periodicals per 1,000 inhabitants (UNESCO, 1997). On the other hand, the use of other media is much higher. For example, there were 320 televisions and 189 radios per 1,000 inhabitants (International Telecommunication Union, 1995; UNESCO). A recent survey on the *Role of Rural Women in Ecological System Conservation* reports that 89% of female leaders across the country received only a primary education, that 54% never received any information through newspapers, and 71% never read magazines. About 94% of these leaders received information from television, 76% from interactions with people, 73% from village radio stations, 55% from radio, and 46% from promotional materials (Chakkraponse, 1996).

These problems call for changes in the provision of library and information services. Libraries, as major providers of information, have a crucial role in the process of rural development by providing appropriate information for the majority who reside in rural areas. However, the library community in Thailand has not yet fulfilled that role.

Patterns of library service delivery

Since the study was aimed to explore the diverse service delivery patterns, five case studies were selected from the existing structures of library and information services to rural communities in Thailand: three from the public library system (which extend its services to the village level through its learning centers and village reading centers), one from the university library extension programs, and one from the school system. Selection of cases were based on the purposes of the study, geographical differences, and working hypotheses. Before the discussion of findings, the three systems are briefly introduced as follows.

The public library system is within the Department of Non-Formal Education, in the Ministry of Education. While the public library is under the District Non-Formal Education Center, it is also under the Center for the Promotion of Informal Education within the same Department Such a structure makes implementation of the policies at the local level ineffective because the library and the non-formal education center compete with each other for scarce resources.

Within the Ministry of University Affairs, the Department of Library Science of a university in the northeast provides the bookmobile service to rural children. This is one example of 10 *university library extension programs*, which currently provide more or less the same services to different rural communities.

Within *the formal school system*, under the Office of the National Primary Education Commission, this particular school has adopted the pattern of a combined school and community library. The concept of a combined library was introduced by UNESCO in 1992. Presently, there are at least five schools which follow this pattern.

From the analysis, five patterns of services delivery under three systems were found currently providing library services to the rural communities under study. Under the public library system, *rural public libraries* are located in the district town centers and function mainly to support non-formal education. *Learning centers* and *village reading centers* serve to extend services to communities at the grassroots level. While learning centers have demonstrated their potential as an effective pattern of delivering services to rural populations; village reading centers, despite their long existence, appear to be in a state of decline. All service patterns under the public library system reflect a large number of constraints in terms of organizational structure, funding, and human resources. Despite good leadership and commitment to the community of both administrators and staff, certain factors have contributed to the ineffectiveness and slow development of public library service in rural areas. These include: a low level of authority of public libaries; a lack of good planning and management; a lack of adequate budgets and of professionally trained personnel; and not enough appropriate library resources.

The *bookmobile project*, part of a university library extension program, was found to be a very successful service delivery pattern in rural areas The *combined school and community library*, within the school library system exemplifies another appropriate pattern. These two case studies, which exemplify two different but appropriate service patterns, the bookmobile and the combined library, share essential components for effective and sustainable services--i.e., adequate funding, good planning and management, good leadership, commitment to the community, availability of and access to information, provision of user education, and the diffusion of successful patterns. Two other components--adequate support from parent organizations; and recognition by administrators and staff at all levels of the importance and value of libraries and information-- were found only in the bookmobile case study.

While the study found appropriate policy directives exist, the level of success in implementing those policies seems to depend on a combination of various factors. In addition to favorable factors relating to organizational structure and resources, serious consideration of local concerns and structures contribute to successful implementation. For example, in public library cases, most policies have not been successfully implemented due to an organizational framework which deemphasizes library activities in favor of educational activities, an administrative structure which is highly bureaucratic, and a lack of resources. Nonetheless, success could be seen when policy directives are conducive to local involvement (such as mobilization of local resources, and institutional cooperation), and when the implementation of policies take into consideration local concerns and structures as exemplified by some learning centers and village reading centers.

The success of the bookmobile service and the combined library also highly rely on effective implementation of two policies: mobilization of local resources and cooperation between institutions. Despite adequate resources, services are found ineffective when there is a low level of community participation and involvement. It should also be noted that the success of these two projects have been influenced by outside intervention--university faculty members in the bookmobile project, and the royal patronage in the combined library.

The policy regarding the application of information technology has received a high priority by the current public library administration. Different types of information technology have been used to deliver education and library services (e.g, village news broadcasting stations, slides, video, television, satellite communication, and computers). However, due to the the enthusiasm and exclusive attention toward computer technology, public libraries have yet to exploit the capacity of low-cost and simple technology. Current use of microcomputers has not been carefully planned and implemented. Although library automation lends a modern look to one of the libraries under study, it is not an integrated system and lacks networking capacity. It is not part of the public library automation system, which is still being developed. Thus, this project will create problems of standardization, compatibility, as well as of system integration and networking.

The bookmobile service and the combined library are mostly book-based; however, microcomputers have been appropriately used--to manage the growing collection of children's books in the first, and to complement learning and teaching through Computer-Aided Instruction programs in the latter.

Administrators assigned to plan and supervise public libraries are usually educators and not trained in library and information science. Despite their commitment and enthusiasm, they lack a professional understanding of planning and management of library systems and services. They equate "literacy promotion" to "library promotion," and thus concentrate efforts and resources on non-formal education activities. Librarians and other library staff feel that they are not appropriately assigned to work according to their professional training. With low status, dim career prospects, and low morale, they feel overwhelmed by too many responsibilities. However, they work with a commitment to the communities and express their needs for more training programs that will help update their knowledge and skills.

On the contrary, the bookmobile service and the combined library are managed by professionally trained librarians and staff. Teacher-librarians and project workers are highly satisfied and enthusiastic with their jobs despite their low professional status and lack of career advancement.

The analysis identifies the information needs in five rural communities in such areas as agriculture, occupations, employment, land rights, citizenship, education, health, local politics, current news and events, and recreation. From the information providers' perspective, however, there are many kinds of information that rural populations are not aware of, such as health education, drug prevention, sex education, parenting information, and environmental

conservation. The overall use patterns in five rural communities show that most users are literate or newly literate groups, and that children are many of the most active users.

Both public library administrators and staff realize that services and resources are still inadequate. However, use and circulation statistics as well as observations indicate low use and low demand for library services. This, according to public library service providers, is caused by the lack of information awareness and lack of good reading habits of the rural population. But, from the community perspective, low use and no use are caused by inadequate access to libraries services, unavailability of appropriate reading materials, preference of other media, particularly television, and lack of time because people are struggling for their economic survival.

Based on the findings, a number of recommendations are proposed to improve and promote the existing services. The most important ones include: the organizational restructuring of the public library system, institutional cooperation, and community empowerment.

The organizational restructuring will enable the public library system to operate independently with its own administrative structures, budgets, and staff in order to provide better services. However, if the system has to stay the same, it is necessary to have more integration of goals and roles of education and public library services to provide services that contribute to rural development, such as literacy programs and information programs for functional and recreational purposes. More appropriate books and materials should be provided for learning centers and village reading centers.

In a resource-constrained situation, institutional cooperation seems to be an effective strategy that helps the libraries expand and improve its services in a cost-effective ways. For example, the bookmobile project has cooperated with foreign agencies, and this enables the project to receive substantial funding to carry on the project for over 15 years. The project also cooperates with the formal education system to provide their services to rural students and teachers or even to extend services to remote areas.

One question raised by this study is how to maintain community enthusiasm, interest, and involvement in the library projects. Community empowerment is therefore recommended. This strategy includes: leadership training on topics such as participative planning and decision making as well as collective actions; active mobilization of community participation in library activities; and creating a support system for local initiatives and actions.

In addition to the above discussion, other useful recommendations include the reformulation of the national information policies that focus more on social needs, organizational capacity building through education and training, provision of appropriate information, application of appropriate information technology, designing innovative approaches in library and information service delivery, raising awareness of the important role of library and information services in the process of rural development, and systematic evaluation of rural library and information services.

Conclusion

Ekasadi Daengdej, the Chairman of the Library Foundation, a non-governmental organization, commented,

...If children don't read, it is because they don't have a chance to experience the joy of reading. And this often happens because they [simply] have nothing to read. How can they develop a reading habit then? (Daengdej as cited in Tansubhapol, 1997, p. 1)

Such comment also holds true for adults. Libraries are expected to provide the best resources and services in any circumstances. If people lack the habit of reading, it is our responsibility to develop, maintain and promote it through our services. The value of information will be

appreciated if libraries can make people understand what they can do with information. As such, only striving to provide services may not be enough, librarians need to feel inspired and to put imagination to work so as to reach further. And this certainly involves a shift in attitudes toward a people-oriented spirit.

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